

Industry Report



Government must get a grip on exports

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The government is quietly consulting on how it should facilitate trade and help businesses grow their exports. This is a welcome step - exports are absolutely critical for achieving the economic growth the UK needs. However, despite this acknowledgment, direct financial support for exporters has been repeatedly cut and, ultimately, eliminated altogether.

This lack of backing has discouraged businesses from exploring new and diverse markets. Instead, they've focused on safer, nearby opportunities where the return on investment feels more certain. This inward-looking approach has caused a worrying erosion of exporting skills and led to many missed opportunities.

A recent survey conducted by the Department for International Trade (DIT) found that nearly 30% of businesses reported a lack of export knowledge - a sharp rise from 23% in 2019. Without meaningful government intervention, this trend will only worsen.

The call for action: Addressing key export challenges

Members of GAMBICA, the trade association for suppliers of laboratory equipment, believe UK growth hinges on proactive government support for exporters. They argue this must include:

- Addressing the persistent challenges stemming from Brexit.
- Maintaining regulatory alignment with the EU.
- Resolving delays in export licenses.
- Providing effective financial support to exporters.

Surprisingly, helping exporters expand into new markets doesn't require vast sums of money. A modest investment of £10-20 million - comparable to funding levels under the now-defunct Tradeshow Access Programme - could make a transformative impact. In fact, the previous programme delivered an extraordinary return on investment of £40 for every £1 spent. Yet, the current lack of tangible support raises a critical question:

Is the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) fit for purpose?

A department misaligned with SME export needs

While the DBT boasts well-educated and dedicated officials, its track record suggests it may not be the right organisation to spearhead the UK's export revival. The department



Paul Alger, chair of UK Export Partners



excels at assisting large, world-renowned exporters but often appears disconnected from the practical challenges faced by SMEs.

For instance, the Tradeshow Access Programme suffered from chronic delays. SMEs often found out too late about grant availability, leaving only wealthier companies - those who could afford to exhibit without a grant - to benefit. This failure excluded new or undecided exhibitors, for whom grants could have been a decisive factor.

Today, the DBT offers only 'soft' advisory support, which places heavy reliance on its officers' market expertise. However, as generalists frequently reassigned to new roles, they often lack the deep sector knowledge needed to provide meaningful assistance.

A new vision: Industry-led export support

Perhaps it's time to entrust export support to those with firsthand industry knowledge and a vested interest in success. Organisations like **UK Export Partners** are advocating for a radical rethink.

They argue that instead of positioning DBT as the central hub for export support, the government should empower industry bodies to lead the charge. These bodies possess the sector-specific expertise and connections that government departments simply cannot replicate.

As UK Export Partners puts it:

"DBT should act as an enabler rather than a deliverer, allowing industries to determine what they need and how it should be delivered."

They suggest embedding DBT's international trade advisers within industry bodies to better align their expertise with real-world needs. This approach could reduce duplication, foster collaboration, and free up funds to reinvest in high-impact export programmes.

"Whilst DBT has grown its team and its overhead, this has not necessarily been in the areas most needed by business. We have seen a worrying increase in the number of events in the UK to promote the idea of exports without actual activity to put UK companies in front of international buyers. Our key competitors including Italy, France, Spain and Turkey have continued to invest massively in promoting their industries,

giving them a long-term competitive advantage which is denied to UK companies, with many of them emulating UK schemes which have now been dismantled in the UK and which made UK companies successful.”

The way forward

GAMBICA supports UK Export Partners’ call for reform and will be pressing the government to focus on:

- Restoring seamless trade with the EU by renegotiating aspects of the UK-EU Trade Co-operation Agreement.
- Maintaining alignment with international standards and regulations, particularly those set by the EU, to keep UK goods competitive.

If you have thoughts on how grants for exporters should be administered, there’s still time to contribute. GAMBICA is inviting input for its response to the government consultation. Share your views by emailing jacqueline.balian@gambica.org.uk.

The stakes couldn’t be higher. It’s time for the UK to get serious about exports and give its businesses the tools they need to succeed on the global stage.

Good news from North Western Universities

Distributors within the GAMBICA membership have repeatedly voiced concerns about the imposition of a requirement for Professional Indemnity Insurance on those supplying universities with lab equipment. Just before Christmas, a group of GAMBICA members briefed the North Western Universities’ Purchasing Consortium on issues affecting the supply chain for lab equipment and this issue was raised again.

I’m pleased to be able to say that we have had a positive outcome! David Yates, Sustainable Relationships Manager for NWUPC has written to GAMBICA to say that as far as NWUPC is concerned PI insurance will only be requested where the relevant



agreement/contract would include the provision of advice upon which the customer is relying- typically linked to product design, particularly if the intellectual property of the customer is shared in supporting the design.

NWUPC advise that, where a supplier does not think PI is relevant to the advertised contract then they clarify this with the authority during the clarification period.



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